DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 196 013 CS 206 007

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TITLE Oral Histories as Living Literature.
PUB DATE Nov 80
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (70th, Cincinnati, OH, November 21-26, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *English Instruction; Higher Education; Language Arts; *Oral History; *Oral Interpretation; Secondary Education; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

For many reasons, oral histories should commend themselves to classroom teachers. Sensitively edited, they are eminently readable because of their intimacy, their authenticity, and their varied presentation of human life. As with other books, especially novels written in the first person and autobiographies, oral histories can provide students with insight into the lives of those far different from themselves. Oral history can be used by teachers interested in oral interpretation. Questions concerning the age of the speaker, his or her attitude toward the immediate and distant audience, the speaker's values, and the tone (pitch, volume, quality) of the speaker's voice can aid in the interpretation. For the language arts or English teacher, oral histories can be a springboard into various writing and editing assignments. Students can interview each other, family members, or members of their communities. Through the experience of interviewing, transcribing, and editing, students can learn that everyone has a story to tell and a personal heritage to be preserved. (A short bibliography of oral histories and how-to books on oral history is provided.) (MKM)

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ORAL HISTORIES AS LIVING LITERATURE

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I do not recall how or when I first became interested in oral histories. I do know that I am an inveterate reader of autobiographies, that I enjoy immersing myself in the lives of others. Unlike the consumers of National Enquirer, however, I like my prose unpurple, my sources documented, and my stories straight from the person who has lived the recounted experience, and who, by taking pen in hand, has implicitly invited me to witness and to participate vicariously in their re-creation. Alfred Kazin's A Walker in the City (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1951), Lillian Hellman's An Unfinished Woman (Bantam, 1970 or Little, Brown & Co., 1969), Richard Wright's Black Boy (Harper & Brothers, 1945), and Maxine Hong Kingston's Warrior Woman (Alfred A. Knopf, 1977) are worth inestimably more than a passel of Liz Smith's syndicated columns or a decade's subscription to US or People magazines.

I know also that as a reader of novels, I usually find first-person narrators more intimate, more engaging, more credible than those who, God-like, manage to cloak themselves in both invisibility and omniscience. Ishmael and Moll Flanders, Huck and Holden, spring fully blown from opening pages, endearing themselves to the reader/listener with their seeming willingness to bare their personalities and, like the Ancient Mariner, to confide their tales to a passing stranger. Who among us can forget those disarming and beguiling first lines that set loose ripples on the edge of eddies that would draw us deeper and deeper into fictive lives far different from our own:

"Call me Ishmael."

> My true name is so well known in the records or registers at Newgate, and in the old Bailey, and there are some things of such consequence still depending there, relating to my particular conduct, that it is not to be expected I should set my name or the account of my family to this work....

> You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, but that ain't no matter.
>
> If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going in to it, if you want to know the truth.

Even as a reader of poetry, I have found Browning's dramatic soliloquies drawn from the Renaissance, Edwin Arlington Robinson's first-person accounts of the enigmatic inhabitants of Tilbury Town, and Edgar Lee Master's celebrant, ironic, and tormented voices from the Spoon River cemetery more poignant and disturbing than poems written by poets allegedly superior to them in both range of vision and artistic technique. And, if forced to make a choice, I would sacrifice Paradise Lost to preserve The Canterbury Tales, whose colorful characters--lusty and chaste, nefarious and virtuous--I understandably find more understandable than I do the Almighty.

Clearly, I like an I, a human voice, an individual whose life I can enter unobtrusively, to whose personality I can respond positively or negatively, upon whom I can fix human responsibility for human behavior, or, in the case of the hereditarily down-trodden, at least gain some sense of the forces oppressing them.

Undoubtedly it was the glitter of the I that first attracted me to the work of the anthropologist Oscar Lewis, whose oral histories of poor Mexicans and Puerto Ricans--Five Families, The Children of Sanchez, La Vida--helped me to understand from the inside the daily struggle of the deeply poor not merely to survive but to survive with dignity and integrity, to keep their values intact despite the impoverished circumstances of their lives. That struggle, one often lost to such seemingly invisible and implacable forces as urbanization, industrialization, and bureaucratic liberalism, continues in the barrios and ghettoes of every large American

city.

The appeal of the I--such a small word with such infinite diversity!--has taken me in recent years from the work of Oscar Lewis to that of other popular and academic compilers of oral history: to Studs Terkel's first-person accounts of Chicago political life, of the depression, and of labor in this nation--Division Street: America (Avon, 1975), Hard Times (Pantheon, 1970), and Working (Pantheon, 1972); to Theodore Rosengarten's stunning oral history of an eighty-five year-old Black Alabama sharecropper--All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1974), winner of a National Book Award in 1975; to Roland Blythe's superb oral histories of daily life and of old age in a Suffolk village undergoing transition--Akenfield (Penguin Books, Ltd., 1969) and The View in Winter (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1979); to Robert and Jane Coles' two-volume oral history of contemporary females under diverse social and economic pressures--Women in Crisis (Delacorte Press, 1978); to the numerous volumes of oral accounts of Appalachian life recorded and edited by the students of Eliot Wigginton--the Foxfire books (Doubleday); to Helen Epstein's transcriptions of the psychically scarring effects of the Holocaust upon the sons and daughters of those who survived--Children of the Holocaust (Putnam, 1979).

Like traditional works of literature, oral histories, dozens of which have been published in the past decade, are not all of a piece. Some result from interview schedules and a rigorous research design, some from impromptu questions and a haphazard sampling of individuals; some are edited from handwritten notes, some from recorded tapes; some are winnowed by editors with a literary sense of style and an ear attuned to the telling moments of a human life, some by editors with little sense of style or of what has human import. When the histories are done well, they transcend

whatever methodology gave them birth, transmuting what are often unfocused vocal ramblings into the rhetorically dramatic structures of good, perhaps even great, literature.

It should not surprise that many of tne oral histories I have cited have proved popular with both adult readers and students. Like soliloquizers in drama, individuals featured in oral histories speak in present time, the omnipresent now, even though the major content of their speech may be drawn from the immediate or heretofore forgotten past. Like the first-person narrators of autobiographies, poems, short stories, and novels, speakers in oral histories establish a confidential, intimate relationship with the reader/listener, though some speakers, just as some fictive narrators, are more trusting and trustworthy than are others. As with the novel, the canvas of an oral history can be broad or narrow, selective or comprehensive, presenting, as in Terkel's Working, a multiplicity of persons representing various walks of life or, as in Rosengarten's All God's Dangers, a single life arranged chronologically, from the earliest recollections of childhood to those of old age.

The form, like that of the novel, has the capability of capturing nuances of character in [illegible]g and old, poor and rich, male and female, native born and foreign born; through it, contrastive personalities--the indolent and the industrious, the rebellious and the conforming, the pious and the profane, the sanguine and the defeated--all can give voice to their experiences and their values, and, through speech, can compose the discordant parts of themselves. Finally, oral histories share with autobiographies the verisimilitude that derives from the expressed experiences of real persons, from lives lived, though the authenticity of the former is enhanced by the reader's knowledge that the words on the page were initially unrehearsed

speech rather than the polished prose that comes from long reflection and numerous revisions.

For many reasons, oral histories should commend themselves to classroom teachers. Sensitively edited, they are eminently readable for many of the reasons already given--their intimacy, their authenticity, their panoramic as well as sharply focused presentations of human life. As with works of the imagination, oral histories can provide students with empathic experiences into the lives of those far different from themselves--different in age, in sex, in geographical roots, in religion, in ethnicity, in degree of affluence. They can furnish students in search of values with persons whose beliefs and behavior are worthy of emulation, just as they can expose those unworthy of imitation.

For teachers interested in oral interpretation of literature, oral histories can enrich the classroom. Students can be given frequent opportunity to take on different voices, characters, lives. Through such questions as the following, they can be taught a heuristic to help them burrow into the character of any given speaker: 1. How old is the speaker? 2. What does he/she look like? 3. What is the physical environment in which the speaker finds himself/herself? 4. What is the speaker concerned about as he/she begins to speak? 5. What is the speaker's attitude toward his/her immediate and distant audiences? 6. How physically, socially, and economically comfortable is the speaker? 7. What can you infer about the speaker's childhood? 8. What can you infer about the speaker's values? 9. What would you anticipate for the speaker's future? 10. What is the tone--the pitch, volume, quality--of the speaker's voice? Out of such questions should emerge not only more valid interpretations of character in oral histories and fictive literature but heightened sensitivity to the lives of speakers in the students' immediate environment.

For enterprising teachers, oral histories can be a springboard into various writing and editing assignments. After studying models of effective interviewing and editing techniques, students might initially interview each other, organize and edit their notes or transcripts, and write them to be compiled and published as an oral history of their class. They might conduct a series of interviews of relatives--parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles--to obtain oral histories of their families. They might move out into their communities--as have the students of Eliot Wigginton and teachers sponsoring publications similar to Foxfire--to obtain and permanently record the reminiscences and folklore of local inhabitants.

For those sufficiently ambitious as to wish to undertake a Foxfire-type magazine, I recommend You and Aunt Arie, a paperback written by Pamela Wood and published by Institutional Development and Economic Affairs Services, Inc. (IDEAS), Magnolia Star Route, Nederland, Colorado 80466. In You and Aunt Arie Ms. Wood, who sponsors SALT, a magazine modeled after Foxfire and published by students in Kennebunkport, Maine, answers all the bread-and-butter questions that might concern the nervous sponsor of a new journal of oral history: how to organize a staff; how to conduct interviews; how to transcribe and edit; how to proofread; how to use the camera effectively; how to set up a dark room; and, most important, how to finance the enterprise. Teachers looking for a lodestar to guide them from hesitant impulse to final print should find it in Ms. Wood's book.

The classroom uses for oral history seem to be near inexhaustible, whether as literature to be read, to be interpreted and dramatized, or to be written. From the experiences of reading and of orally interpreting books like John Baskin's New Burlington: The Life and Death of an American Village and Janine Wiedel and Martina O'Fearadhaigh's Irish Tinkers (St.

Martin's Press, 1976), students can begin to develop an ear for the rhythms of the spoken language when it is used most elegantly and eloquently, an ear that should preclude their writing in later life the unspeakable bureaucratic prose that now unremittently issues forth from officialdom, threatening to drown all of us in typographic cacophony. From the experience of reading and interviewing, students can discover that everyone, even the most humble among us, has a story to tell, a story whose significance depends largely upon the skills and empathic responses of the interviewer. Finally, through the experience of interviewing, transcribing, and editing, students can learn to preserve much of their two-fold cultural heritage--a personal heritage to be found in the lives of relatives, and a shared heritage to be found in the lives of local citizens.

Permit me to conclude with a personal note. My wife's grandmother, Margaret Elizabeth Hayes--affectionately known as Maggie--died some years ago at age 103. A woman of strong values and sound physique, she had been born in New London, Iowa, in 1862 and had lived there all her life. Until six months before her death, she had maintained by herself a three-story house, gardened, crocheted, painted, and quilted; until her mid-nineties she had picked apples out of her apple tree, washed and ironed clothing, preserved fruit, and written occasional letters. A school teacher when young, Maggie had retired early in her career to rear her offspring, four sons and a daughter. She had founded the local chapter of the DAR and was throughout her life a rock-bottom Republican: upon receiving a telegram from President Kennedy congratulating her upon having reached her centennial, she first commented, "I don't think he really wrote it," then added, "I just want to live to be 102 so I can vote against him again."

Unfortunately, aside from a handful of preserved letters, and a few

documents related to such matters as her birth, baptism, marriage, and death, Maggie left behind no written record of the daily drama of her life, of her chores and her play as a child; of her schooling and her teaching; of her responsibilities as wife and mother; of her travels; and of her witnessing a century's change within her town, her state, her nation. By failing to record Maggie's oral reminiscences while she was alive, my wife and I diminished our own lives and deprived our two sons, neither of whom had been born before their great-grandmother died of a sense of familial continuity that should be theirs.

In the age of easily accessible paper tablets and pencils and of inexpensive tape recorders, it is inexcusable that we should permit lives important to us or to our students to go mute to the grave.

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